

The co-construction of cybersex narratives

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Forthcoming in *Discourse & Society*

now published: vol 20,
pp 161-170

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Abstract

This article discusses the linguistic practice of cybersex and how it is discursively constructed. The analysis is based on naturally occurring, private cybersex conversations from an online community that is not sexual in scope or purpose. It is argued that cybersex participants co-construct narratives that differ from both standard dialogic and polyphonic narratives. Additionally, participants shift between first-, second- and third-person reference forms. It is reasoned that the distinct narrative and style shifts serve as communicative functions in co-constructing a cybersex scene. Although participants rely on mutual engagement and linguistic reciprocity, there are notable gender differences in who constructs the narrative's 'complicating action' (cf. Labov, 1972) and who supports it through linguistic attentiveness (e.g., backchanneling) and responsiveness (e.g., mirroring). Ultimately it is argued that although cybersex narratives are co-constructed, they are also reflections and reifications of heteronormative ideologies of sex and gender, particularly with respect to sexual agency.

Keywords

cybersex; discourse; discourse analysis; feminist linguistics; gender; heteronormativity; narratives; narrative analysis; person reference; sex talk; sexual agency; sexuality; story-telling; style shifts

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Introduction

Cybersex can be described as a linguistic practice involving multi-party real-time interaction in the construction of an erotic representation of sexual activities. This article analyses naturally occurring cybersex conversations from the Walford corpus. Walford is an online chat community where sex talk is incidental; the community is not sexual in scope or purpose. Using examples from this corpus, it is argued that there are normative patterns in cybersex that include narrative structure and gender and sexuality ideologies.

Participants' convention of using third-person self-reference during cybersex, and the first-person before, after, and during any breaks is viewed as linked to narrative construction, rapport, and footing within the erotic scene that participants co-construct. Participants also make use of both second- and third-person references in a single turn on some occasions. Turns with these dual person references precede switches in turn-taking and can be read as signals for co-interactant involvement.

Cybersex narratives are based on 'complicating action' (cf. Labov, 1972) where co-interactants construct a representation of sexual activities together. However, issues of narrative direction and support between speakers are located within discourses of heteronormativity, particularly with respect to heterosexual gender relations and sexual agency. The examples discussed here show male personas deploying their sexual agency throughout the construction of cybersex, even when the focus is on female

pleasure, whilst female personas can be seen as supporting and adding depth to their co-interactants' constructions but rarely voicing their own sexual desires directly or advancing the narrative's complicating action. The presentation of sexual agency can be seen as reflecting heteronormative ideologies of sex, sexuality, and gender as represented in dominant heterosexuality discourses, including that of mainstream heterosexual pornography.

Linguistic views of sex and desire / theorising heterosexuality in cybersex

Language provides people with a way for articulating sexuality and norms for communicating about it. As Kitzinger (2005) explains, sexuality is not only displayed through an array of actions: it is talked into being. For example, Rendle-Short (2005) discusses how, in the brief and anonymous interactions that characterise talk-back radio, callers may index their heterosexuality either directly or referentially, which orients them to normative heterosexuality. In addition to sexual 'positionality' (cf. Harré and van Lagenhove, 1998) that can be expressed through language, desire adds a component to discussions of language, sex and sexuality. The notion that sexual identity, sex, and desire are connected is no longer contentious within sociolinguistics (e.g., Cameron and Kulick, 2003, 2006; Harvey and Shalom, 1997; Kitzinger, 2005; Queen, 2007; Sauntson and Kyratzis, 2007). Put another way: how people discuss these topics is always linked

to who and how they desire, which is framed within the sociocultural world/s that they inhabit.

Discourses of heterosexuality cannot be separated from gender. Jackson (1999) asserts that heterosexual eroticism and power are entwined given systems of gender inequality and their manifestation in individual sexual practices. Attwood (2009: xxii) states that there are signs that sexuality is being transformed by “the rise of the ‘sassy, sexy, strong’ girl”. However, it is important to recognise that an upsurge of ‘sassy, sexy, strong’ women does not necessarily mean that patriarchal gender and sexuality discourses are undergoing transformation. Contemporary discourses of heterosexuality, influenced by what has been described as the ‘pornification’ of culture (Paasonen et al., 2007), or ‘porno-chic’ (Duits and van Zoonen, 2006), and the mainstreaming of ‘up for it’ female sexuality (Evans et al., 2010) within which the ‘sassy, sexy, strong’ woman is located, are linked to how cybersex participants construct their desires and practices of sexual agency.

Sexual reciprocity, or mutual exchange, can be conflated with sexual agency and empowerment (Ringrose and Renold, 2012). Although the notion of reciprocity may also be seen as equality in sex, Gilfoyle et al. (1992) argue that a discourse of heterosexuality that rests on reciprocity may be part of patriarchal gender discourse. They assert that “women are seen as the object who is both ‘given away’ and ‘given to’; while men on the other hand, are seen as the subject maintaining their dominance by both being the recipient of the woman and conferring on the object (woman) the gift of pleasure or orgasm” (Gilfoyle et al., 1992: 218). However, Braun et al. (2003) make

clear that whilst discourses of heterosexuality and reciprocity can enable men's and disenfranchise women's sexual agency, they are not limited to that function. Another salient point is from Gill (2007: 258) who states that some women are "endowed with sexual agency on the condition that it is used to construct oneself as a subject resembling the heterosexual male fantasy". The heterosexual male fantasy that affords some women sexual agency relies on men's dominance and/or direction of their sexuality as well as both genders' complacency with positions shaped by patriarchal gender discourses and heteronormative sexual ideologies. The option to construct sexual agency, even within this restrictive framework, is further limited across the intersections of gender, sexuality, race, class, ability, religious, and age discourses. Although the web has been positioned as a medium where there is greater safety and fewer social sanctions for exploring sexuality (e.g., Gray, 2009; McKenna and Bargh, 1998; Wysocki, 1998), the cybersex narratives co-constructed in Walford reflect hegemonic heteronormative sexuality.

Methods

The conversations discussed here are from Walford, an online synchronous chat community known as a multi-user domain (MUD). Walford was created in 1993 with the virtual geography of a present-day English village. MUDs provide users with creative control over their screen-involved environment, including space (e.g., buildings

and rooms) and communicative options (e.g., communication types, settings, and commands). Unformatted text is the sole way of communicating in Walford and is used when moving around the space, creating new ‘objects’, and communicating with other users.

Walford’s infrastructure is similar to other MUDs, such as ElseMOO (Cherny, 1999) and BlueSky (Kendall, 2002), and highly differentiated communication is possible. In addition to ‘speaking’, participants’ options include emoting, thinking, and whispering. Users are also able to program new communication commands and choose the privacy settings for each utterance. The *local* setting allows participants to communicate with all users located in the same room, whilst the *direct* setting allows them to communicate to specific people regardless of their location within the MUD. Although cybersex is not restricted to either setting, the local setting was used for all instances of cybersex found in the sample.

Walford participants have a reasonable expectation of privacy. Combined with the individual privacy controls that users employ on their communications (e.g., using the *local* or *direct* setting), only those who have created accounts and are currently connected to the MUD can receive the real-time chats. No conversations are accessible to non-members, and those who participated in previous conversations have no way of accessing them again.

Walford was run independently until the early 2000s. At that time, Walford's founders and the Department of Computer Science (DCS)¹ at Queen Mary University of London (who were known to the Walford community) came to an arrangement in which the MUD would be hosted on the DCS servers and the Department would also provide technical support. In exchange, the MUD would be used for communication research. This arrangement lasted until 2004 when server issues disrupted Walford's connectivity.

A quantitative analysis found that there were approximately 1,500 regular monthly Walford users, who were from North America and Europe predominantly (Healey et al. 2008). There is no reliable data regarding other user demographics, such as participants' (offline) ages or genders. However, there is evidence from topic talk that many users were likely aged in their 20s-30s (e.g., many discussed careers, marriages, and home ownership; some mentioned their ages). Many regular participants appeared to interact with each other on multiple planes: for example, there were discussions of photo-sharing/swapping and webcam sessions; offline meet-ups and conferences; references to offline friendships and relationships with other users. From how users gendered themselves and other users, including those not present in conversations, Walford appeared to be a mixed gender space with more men than women.

This analysis is based on a corpus of conversational logs from 2003-2004, the period when DCS supported Walford and recorded all conversations in the MUD. The

¹ In 2009 the Departments of Computer Science and Electronic Engineering merged to form the School of Electronic Engineering and Computer Science.

chatlogs are held on a secure server with restricted access to those currently conducting research using them. Researchers access the logs with their individual log-in details. A total of 75 chatlogs were examined from the top, middle, and bottom locations in the folder to obtain a sample from the entire temporal period.

Each chatlog consists of 24 hours of interaction within the MUD, meaning that over the approximate 18-month period of logs, the sample comprises nearly 7.3% of the corpus. Files were manually read and XML annotations were added when conversations were considered to be sexual. Although there are difficulties measuring the frequency of 'sex talk', approximately 10% of the data could be considered 'sexual' in some way (Mykietiak 2008). This percentage includes cybersex but also conversations about other sexual topics, including but not limited to: joking, self-disclosure, automated commands that participants have written into the communication structure (they can 'snog' or 'shag' each other in randomly generated styles and positions for randomly generated amounts of time; these commands are frequently used in playful and competitive ways, but rarely as precursors to cybersex), flirting, innuendo, and the sexualisation of others. The analysis presented here is from a larger study that focuses more widely on discourse and sex talk in Walford.

A series of protections were taken that are mindful of the ethical concerns of both sex and web research to ensure the anonymity and privacy of Walford's users. These protective measures can be divided into four main categories: ongoing informed consent, site pseudonym, substitution of usernames, and the removal of potentially identifying information.

Despite the controversy associated with informed consent among those conducting online research, including those working on sex and sexuality topics (e.g., Ashford, 2009; del-Teso Craviotto, 2006; King 2012), each time users logged into Walford they were directed to a screen informing them that conversations in the MUD would be used for research and of the risks associated with participating. In order to enter the MUD, potential users needed to consent to these terms each time they connected. Although gaining users' informed consent may have had an effect on conversations in the MUD, as Hudson and Bruckman (2004) suggest is possible, there is evidence that any effect was likely minimal. Walford was an established community by the time that it moved to DCS; 'interaction rituals' (cf. Goffman, 1967) and friendships, whether confined to the MUD or not, were established. The privacy of the MUD combined with measures that DCS took to preserve the anonymity of Walford's users may have also offered a buffer against this; DCS was chosen by Walford's founders and trusted by them, which might have assuaged any potential fears from users. Finally, there was no evidence of users raising issues or concerns in this sample of chatlogs; however, some users mentioned their interest in the research (e.g., wondering what the researchers were finding).

The use of site pseudonyms is an established practice for MUD researchers (e.g., Cherny, 1999; Kendall, 2002) as well as for those using other types of online communities to examine sex and sexuality (e.g., Munt et al., 2002; Wysocki; 1998). While some researchers of online sexual cultures, such as Mowlabocus (2008), have elected not to use site pseudonyms, this work draws from MUD researchers who have

adopted them for their sites; ‘Walford’ is a pseudonym used by all researchers working with the corpus. In addition, the programming code was written in such a way, that as the chatlogs were automatically generated, a one-way hashing algorithm replaced participants’ usernames with numerical sequences.

An additional safeguard concerns topic talk and identification. This includes conversations involving identifiable self-disclosure, such as given or place names, and unique personal or intimate circumstances such that a user may not want to be discussed in a research capacity (or may forget that it could be), even if that user provided consent when logging into Walford. Discretion has been used in these instances. Comparable names have been substituted where appropriate and no conversations with identifiable personal or intimate circumstances have been extracted or had their details referenced.

Cybersex narratives

Sociolinguists have long made use of narrative and discourse analyses to understand how people articulate themselves and their social worlds (e.g., Fairclough, 1992; Labov, 1972; Labov and Waletzky, 1967; Schiffrin, 1987, 1996; Blum-Kulka, 1993). Labov (1972: 359-360) defines narratives as discourse units that involve “matching a verbal sequence of clauses to the sequence of events”. His definition emphasises a chronological sequence of events or actions, including: abstract, orientation, complicating action, resolution, and coda. However, he views only

complicating action as essential to narratives. In addition to these aspects of narratives, Blum-Kulka (1993) encourages examining narratives from three vantage points: the tale, teller, and act of telling. It is possible that such a perspective can offer a thorough analysis of narratives, particularly if we are interested in the discourses that may emerge in narratives. Meanwhile, Schiffrin (1996) contends that narratives provide a modality for speakers to create and express their identities and positions. Cybersex participants use language to describe their proposed actions and as a result co-interactants anticipate involvement. They engage in turn-taking practices, construct a narrative, and respond to co-participants' contributions either by providing building action or backchanneling support. However, *how* participants work together to develop their narrative may reflect and recreate dominant heteronormative and/or patriarchal gender and sexual ideologies, and in doing so participants may align themselves with those ideologies, even if only for the cybersex narrative.

Cybersex narratives occur in temporal order with both speakers contributing to the complicating action. Thus, it could be argued that in addition to situating their own positions, participants create shared footing (cf. Goffman, 1981) or alignment. The negotiation of footing can be represented by rapid exchanges in turn-taking, continuous narrative building, and attention to the sexual desires or responses expressed by a co-interactant. In Example 1, participants begin to engage in cybersex after 27604(F)²

² I have inserted either F or M following the anonymised username to make it easier for readers to note users' sex/gender category presentations. I have used these two categories because the participants have described their personas as male or female.

enters a private room and “waves her hand and a pole appears in the middle of the room”. In this context the “pole” that precedes cybersex is a stripping/dancing pole. Historically such poles have been associated with the sex industry but more recently have been claimed by some women as a way to express themselves as sexually empowered (Holland and Attwood, 2009). This excerpt occurs approximately 10 minutes into their conversation, which is entirely sexual.

Example 1 Cybersex narratives

- 1 44417(M) ’s hot shaft fills you completely...
- 2 44417(M) pulls on you tightly, as he suddenly comes inside you
- 3 44417(M) says “Yes!”
- 4 27604(F) screams with pleasure.
- 5 44417(M) ’s hot seed fills every crevice of your womanhood...
- 6 44417(M) keeps fucking you hard, jolting your entire body with each thrust.
- 7 27604(F) grinds you by twisting and turning, faster and faster... she really wants it rough.
- 8 44417(M) gives it to you so hard your ancestors feel it.
- 9 27604(F) is pleased senseless, she has tears coming to her eyes.

This is not meant to be restrictive, only illustrative of the participants’ construction of sexed bodies.

- 10 44417(M) reaches around and rubs your hardened clit, violently.
- 11 27604(F) whispers “Know any other wild positions? Hehe...”
- 12 44417(M) whatever comes to mind is good for me.
- 13 27604(F) same here... surprise me...

Both participants in this interaction contribute to the shared narrative but to varying degrees. The narrative structure is developed jointly, involves a mirroring process, and is temporally bound. Drawing from Blum-Kulka (1993: 385) who states that dialogic narratives are “constructed typically through a question/answer format”, a standard dialogic narrative typically involves a main story-teller and a co-participant who encourages the main narrator to enrich the narrative with additional information. This contrasts with cybersex co-construction (e.g., Lines 11-13) where both participants can advance the narrative. Despite both participants having the potential to further the scene, in practice 44417(M) constructs most of it with 27064(F) providing additional detail and response. Another distinction between cybersex and standard dialogic narratives is that cybersex does not usually involve a question/answer format (although in Example 2 one of the participants asks his partner a series of tag questions); nor is there a main story-teller and a listener who frequently interjects with comments or additional information, which is common in polyphonic narrative styles. 27604(F) enriches the narrative through mirroring and backchanneling that is critical to plot advancement by 44417(M) (e.g., Lines 4 and 7) and to the story itself.

Although the conversation involves mutual engagement, it is not dialogue driven; Lines 3 and 11 are the only dialogue-based turns in this example. Similarly, in Example 2 there are 47 turns but only 13 of those involve dialogue. Both narratives can be seen as built upon depictions of and responses to actions. This confirms Labov's (1972) assertion that actions are of greater imperative to narratives than dialogue.

The emphasis on complicating action in cybersex means that each turn builds upon the last. However, that does not necessitate that each participant's turn furthers the plot. For example, responding to an action through mirroring can provide depth to the previous turn and the narrative, which demonstrates linguistic attentiveness. The mirroring process can be seen in Lines 3 and 4 of Example 1 when the participants each appear to reach orgasm. Mirroring occurs again in Lines 6-8 when 44417(M) says that he is "fucking you hard" (Line 6). 27604(F) responds with "she really wants it rough" (Line 7), using "rough" to call upon 44417(M)'s term "hard". In doing so, she is also attentive to the narrative direction in which 44417(M) takes their sex act. In Line 8 44417(M)'s mirrors 44417(M) his own use of "hard" and his partner's use of "rough" with the statement "gives it to you so hard your ancestors feel it" (Line 8).

Although 27064(F) provides most of the backchanneling (e.g., Line 3) and mirroring while (e.g., Lines 4, 6) 44417(M) offers most of the narrative development in terms of the complicating action (e.g., Lines 1, 2, 5, 6, 10), both interactants' contributions are necessary for cybersex. 27064(F)'s linguistic attentiveness and responsiveness provide depth and enrichment to the scene. Her role in narration is

crucial to 44417(M)'s narrative development; without it there is plot development but an absence of complicating action.

Style shifts and person reference in cybersex narratives

Shifts in interaction style have the potential to reveal much about co-interactants, their relationship, and the context. In describing style- and code-shifts, Georgakopoulou (1997: 148) notes that these shifts are “drawn upon by the speakers as linguistic resources which enable them to communicate social meanings and accomplish various interactional goals”. Her research is focused on code-shifts as tools for contextualisation, which allow speakers to foster symmetrical alignments and rapport. Although Georgakopoulou does not connect her argument to switches in narrative structure, evidence from the Walford corpus could be used to extend it in this way.

Tanaka (2008: 136) argues that switching to an informal interactional style from a more formal one can “enliven and develop a narrative”. In addition to the story-telling benefits of switching narrative forms, it may be that the switch between first- and third-person styles, which is only noted during cybersex turns, can be a strategy for interactants to place themselves as characters to build their narrative, supporting Tanaka's (2008) case. Thus, their characters are involved in the scene (e.g., Line 2 “he suddenly comes inside you”; Line 9 “she has tears coming to her eyes”), while they construct their narrative. In addition to this, the reference to narrative creation may

explain the use of the first-person (Line 12 “whatever comes to mind is good for me”; Line 13 “same here... surprise me...”).

As well as being a means to develop rapport and enliven a narrative, switches between first- and third-person reference allow participants to position themselves in relation to each other as tellers of a shared sexual story, as shown in Example 2. Contextually, this cybersex narrative begins differently from Example 1. The participants were engaged in a one-on-one conversation prior to cybersex, and they conveyed that they were in an offline relationship with each other but geographically separated for a temporary period.

Example 2 Style shifts in cybersex

- 1 15024(M) says “Perhaps I should fuck you.”
- 2 27087(F) says “Perhaps you should!”
- 3 15024(M) says “You like it nasty, don’t you?”
- 4 15024(M) says “You like it when I spank you, don’t you?”
- 5 15024(M) says “You like it when I eat out your clit, don’t you?”
- 6 27087(F) smiles at you and puts her fingers in her mouth and looks at you shyly
- 7 15024(M) licks 27087’s belly
- 8 27087(F) says “That tickles!!”
- 9 15024(M) kisses her inner leg

10 27087(F) says “Ooh”

11 27087(F) says “You’re so flexible”

12 15024(M) kisses her other inner leg

13 27087(F) wonders how she’s sitting on your lap and you can kiss her legs!

14 15024(M) oops I forgot to push her off me

15 15024(M) pushes her off me

16 27087(F) falls to the floor with a thud

17 15024(M) is now on top of 27087

18 27087(F) says “Oomph”

19 15024(M) kisses 27087’s pussy lips, the left one first and then the right one

20 27087(F) gasps alittleslightly getting excited with anticipation

21 27087(F) darn spacebar

22 15024(M) dips his tung in your juices

23 27087(F) tongue!

24 27087(F) tung sounds like dung!

25 15024(M) slowly brings his Tongue to her clit

26 15024(M) you know what I meant – you don’t have to ruin it by correcting
me

27 27087(F) puts her hand on your head, and strokes your hair gently, sighing
softly

28 15024(M) strokes your clit with his tongue

29 27087(F) tung is just a particularly bad spelling!! Sounds like dung!

- 30 15024(M) reaches in and sticks a finger in your well
- 31 27087(F) moans softly, breathing a little more quickly
- 32 27087(F) mmmm honey
- 33 15024(M) gently massages your g-spot with his finger
- 34 15024(M) is still sucking your clit
- 35 15024(M) do you like it faster?
- 36 15024(M) slower
- 37 27087(F) grows a little more excited with each flick of your tongue
- 38 15024(M) goes a little faster
- 39 27087(F) mmmm Oh Pete
- 40 15024(M) continues until you cum
- 41 27087(F) presses her hips forward, moaning more loudly
- 42 27087(F) sorry
- 43 15024(M) says "Ok I hate to run now."
- 44 27087(F) says "Yeah yeah see ya."
- 45 15024(M) says "But think of me when you go to bed."
- 46 27087(F) says "Have fun."
- 47 27087(F) says "I think I'm going to be."

In Example 1, participants largely avoid first-person pronouns (e.g., *I*, *my*) when describing their actions, and in Example 2 they only use them during cybersex in dialogue-based turns (Lines 4 and 5). In the context of cybersex, shifts in narrative styles underscore the importance of narrative building. The use of the third-person

reference form does not appear to be an attempt to adopt the position of a co-participant here, as Land and Kitzinger (2007) suggest can be the case. Instead, third-person self-references allow these participants to place their personas within the erotic narrative that they are co-constructing.

Further evidence from Example 2 that supports this are the instances during cybersex when the speakers use the third-person to refer to their co-participant. This occurs twice, and in both instances it is immediately after 27087(F) attempts to repair or correct 15024(M)'s actions. The first instance follows 27087(F)'s assertion in Line 13 that the plausibility of the scene is compromised when 15024(M) states that he is kissing her thighs while she is sitting on his lap. 15024(M) breaks from the scene in his response, "oops I forgot to push her off of me" (Line 14). 27087(F) repairs the break and they both return to the use of third-person pronouns. The next instance when this occurs is during the tung/tongue orthographic exchange (Lines 22-30). In Line 22 he "dips his tung in your juices" but when 27087(F) points out what she later refers to as "a particularly bad spelling" (Line 29) he breaks the scene in Line 25, "slowly brings his Tongue to her clit" capitalising the corrected word for emphasis. While he keeps the third-person pronoun for himself, he uses the same modality for 27087(F). On this occasion, just as in the first, the participants then return to the scene and use second-person references for their co-interactant and the third-person for themselves during cybersex.

Schiffin (1996) posits that narrative structures provide a format for people to position and represent their subjectivity and social identities. She states that "many of

the actions and attitudes that we represent through speech are interactional in nature: when we perform an action through speech, we are acting *toward* another person” (Schiffrin, 1996: 196, emphasis in original). Drawing from this, the interactants’ third-person self-reference may describe their own actions while concurrently positioning themselves within the narrative and interaction.

In addition to the interactional element of the third-person style, it could be argued that the adoption of the third-person style is a modality used by the participants to develop erotic imagery. The third-person style fosters the emergence of a scene by the self-distancing that is implied in this narrative form. Building upon that assertion, it could be suggested that once participants have completed their cybersex narrative self-distancing is no longer needed because no further erotic construction is necessary. This may explain why interactants return to the first-person style after finishing their cybersex narrative.

The second-person style also serves particular communicative functions in cybersex.³ While participants switch between first- and third-person for self-reference, there is only one example of the third-person used in reference to a co-interactant (Line 25), when 15024(M) repairs a break in the scene and corrects his spelling (“slowly brings his Tongue to her clit”). In addition to the capitalisation of “Tongue”, the uncharacteristic use of the third-person may be out of frustration, which he expresses in Line 26 “you know what I meant – you don’t have to ruin it by correcting me”. While

³ I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer who I suggested that I extend the discussion to the second-person modality.

participants are consistent with their use of the second-person form, it has different purposes in the interaction. For example, participants use second-person referencing in dialogue-based turns (Lines 3-5) but it is also used as a device to signal involvement in the action and narrative. More specifically, participants use both second- and third-person reference forms within the same turn (Lines 6, 13, 22, 27, 28, 33), which differs from standard narrative structures. However, standard dialogic narratives do not typically have two participants turn-taking in narrative development, as articulated earlier. In this cybersex excerpt, a switch in turn-taking follows those lines with both second- and third-person references, which demonstrates signalling and involvement. The only deviation from this pattern is in Line 33 (“gently massages your g-spot with his finger”), which is the first of four consecutive turns made by 15024(M). When 27087(F) does not take a turn following Line 34, he asks a question in Line 35 (“do you like it faster?”) and again in Line 36 (“slower[?]”). The same pattern of switches in turn-taking following those lines with both second- and third-person narrative references are also found in Example 1 (Lines 2, 7, 9). In these cybersex examples, using second- and third-person reference forms in a single turn may be a way for participants to signal to their co-interactant that they have finished their turn and would like involvement. The use of both second- and third-person reference forms in the same line signals as a turn-taking notice because it directly involves the co-interactant in the interaction ritual in a similar way to how Blum-Kulka (1993) notes a direct question and second person reference, such as in “what do you...”, engages a co-speaker. However,

in cybersex context, the co-interactant does not seek a response to a question but one to the complicating action that they have constructed.

Heteronormative sexualities in cybersex narratives

Although Walford is not codified as a sexual space, in practice the MUD is heterosexual, and cybersex participants enact and reproduce heterosexual and heteronormative sexualities and gender interactional norms, including those from mainstream heterosexual pornography. Mainstream pornography holds a prominent role in representing heterosexual desire, as Corsianos (2007) notes, and its effect on cybersex in Walford can be read on multiple levels. For example, the conversation between 27604(F) and 44417(M) in Example 1 began when she entered the private room where her co-interactant was located via pole. Whilst pole dancing has been associated with the sex industry, through the mainstreaming of pornographic cultures and aesthetics it is now also considered as part of an “active and empowered female sexuality” (Holland and Attwood, 2009: 181). Thus, it holds a paradoxical position where its sociohistorical ties to the sex industry and the objectification of women, usually for the pleasure of heterosexual men, co-exist alongside its new image as part of women’s sexual agency and empowerment (Evans et al., 2010). When 27604(F) uses it as her entrance to the room both its history and contemporary reading are inscribed on

it: she is framed to her audience/co-interactant 44417(M) as a sexual agent or at least as sexy but within the bounds of a heterosexual male fantasy and a pornified culture.

Participants in both examples evoke pornographic imagery in their language, particularly with respect to orthographic and lexical choices. In Example 2, 15024(M) writes “continues until you cum” (Line 40), rather than the more standard ‘come’, which 44417(M) uses in Example 1 (Line 2). Johnsdotter (2011) explains that ‘cum’, in contrast to ‘come’, is erotically charged and exclusive of pornographic contexts. In addition to pornographic orthography, participants use erotic and sexualised slang and adjectives. For example, male personas in both examples use sexualised genital slang to describe both male and female genitals. In addition to the semantic categories of genital-specific slang that Braun and Kitzinger (2001) detail, both 15024(M) and 44417(M) choose eroticised lexical items and adjectives to further develop a pornified aesthetic. For example, in Example 1 15024(M) uses the phrases “hot shaft” (Line 1), “hot seed” (Line 5), and “hardened clit” (Line 10), which are genital-specific, but more notably are suggestive of the language of pornography and show participants’ attempts to develop cybersex narratives that adopt that style.

Mainstream heterosexual pornography is also imprinted on the narrative scripts that the participants develop and how their personas are crafted and enacted within heterosexual and heteronormative pornographic ideals. Pornography is both historically and contemporarily a narrative genre that can be seen as structured on complicating action enacted on screen. These cybersex narratives are similar to those in mainstream heterosexual pornography in the representation of heterosexual ideologies of sex and

gender. Whilst both participants contribute to the narrative, male personas direct the activities and action even when the focus is on the pleasure of the female persona, as seen in Example 2. Thus, Gilfoyle et al.'s (1992) statements about some heteronormative sexual discourses representing men's dominance both in 'getting' the woman and in 'giving' her pleasure seem to be at work here.

What is perhaps most interesting is that the sexual agency of the female personas is largely confined to their sexual willingness. In Example 1, Line 11 when 27604(F) whispers "Know any other wild positions. Hehe..." the whispering, giggling, and ellipsis signal a passivity that is generally associated with dominant discourses heterosexual femininity. Similarly, the phrasing of her question reinforces 44417(M)'s dominant masculinity; she credits him with constructing their first position and uses a positive adjective to describe it, thereby supporting him and reinforcing his dominance over their scene. While she is assertive in requesting a change, she poses it as a theoretical question to her co-participant by asking if he knows any, not as a direct question or a request, and she does not alter her position herself. This may be interpreted as choosing to participate in a sexual script that positions her persona within dominant discourses of both femininity and heterosexuality. 27604(F) can be seen as deflecting the role of sexual initiator (Line 13) even when 44417(M) encourages her to introduce a new narrative direction (Line 12). Although it is possible to argue that this is further complicated because she sexualised their interaction through her entrance, an alternative posit is that by creating a pole rather than directly suggesting cybersex, she adopts a position that, while actively sexual on a surface level, can be read alternatively

as passive, similar to Line 11. By creating the pole she does not take a direct risk: 44417(M) then has the opportunity to reject her advance or deflect it by failing to read or ignoring the ‘collusion’ (cf. Goffman, 1981). The ambiguity of the pole allows her to be sexy within the confines of dominant heteronormative discourses; she has not explicitly voiced desire, only positions herself as sexualised.

In Example 2 the female persona presents personal agency outside of the narrative frame (e.g., Lines 13, 23, 24, 29), but within the cybersex scene her sexual agency is limited. 27807(F) is sexually receptive throughout their cybersex although the scene is constructed around her pleasure. She responds to her co-participant’s activities, backchannels, and she corrects both an implausibility in Line 13 (“wonders how she’s sitting on your lap and you can kiss her legs!”) and an orthographic error in Lines 23, 24, and 29. While 27807(F) displays her personal agency in the conversation, she does not exert sexual agency in taking direction of the encounter or by expressing her sexual desires. 27807(F) may be seen as an example of Attwood’s (2009) ‘strong, smart, sexy’ woman, yet an alternative view could posit that her cybersex positioning lacks sexual agency and is not transforming (hetero)sexuality, including the patriarchal discourses entrenched within it. Her co-participant asks her a number of questions about her sexual preferences (e.g., Lines 3, 4, 5, 35, 36), and although she responds in Line 6 after he asks three questions sequentially, she does not directly address the questions he asked when she “smiles at you and puts her fingers in her mouth and looks at you shyly”. Instead she draws on imagery associated with an archetype of femininity that is associated with mainstream heterosexual pornography (Kipnis 1996): the seductive,

willing, and voiceless ingénue. The only sexual statement that she replies to directly is the first in Line 1 (“perhaps I should fuck you), which is not a question requesting her consent or a suggestion of a mutual or reciprocal activity but a declarative assertion of an act to be done to her. It is worth remarking upon that the syntactic structure of her response mirrors his usage (Line 2, “perhaps you should”). Both the male and female personas in these cybersex scenes use their personal agency to construct sexual agency in ways that have been shaped by both heteronormative and patriarchal discourses of sex and gender. These discourses have been represented and codified in other erotic contexts, particularly mainstream heterosexual pornography.

Conclusion

Cybersex in Walford is grounded in co-constructed narratives and there are specific patterns to this linguistic activity. Cybersex narratives have a distinctive structure that relies on the use of the third-person during the cybersex scene, as well as use of the second-person alongside the third-person form as a way to signal co-participant involvement such as a switch in turn. Participants use this narrative structure consistently despite the relatively recent development of ‘cybersex’ as an interactional genre. That there are already established structures for narrative co-construction, including person reference, in cybersex that differ from the patterns of standard dialogic and polyphonic narrative formats indicates that interaction in this genre is shaped by

other factors. Participants make use of narrative co-construction and person reference forms that better place themselves inside the scene, develop rapport, and enliven their narrative, including its eroticism.

Cybersex in Walford relies on heterosexual and heteronormative interactional norms, and participants actively enact and reify heteronormative gender and sexual ideologies in their co-construction of cybersex. This is done in obvious ways, such as in the dyadic, or two-person, aspect of cybersex found in the corpus, participants' preference for cybersex in private co-located rooms, heterosexual gender-specific pronouns, sexual slang, and their narrative practices. However, much more interesting is how gender and sexual ideologies are recreated and sustained discursively. Although participants co-construct cybersex scenes together there are notable gender differences in the levels of sexual agency directing their cybersex, despite the female personas' agency in other (non-erotic) parts of their interaction. Whilst the female personas in these cybersex scenes represent active female sexuality in their willingness, in the transpiring cybersex narratives they do not voice their own sexual desires, even when asked by their male co-interactants. Instead female personas' cybersex interactional style and turns support the male personas as the male personas direct the sexual activity that occurs. The female personas in these examples position themselves in ways that are highly evocative of mainstream heterosexual pornographic femininity, constructing themselves as sexually responsive, and leaving it to their co-interactants to construct most of the scene while they respond and add depth to that composition. Even when encouraged to add to the narrative development, their personas instead focus on

supporting their male co-interactant's construction of the scene and his sexual agency. Gill's (2007) argument can be extended to this community in that sexual agency among female personas in Walford is limited to existing within a male heterosexual fantasy, particularly one that is expressed in mainstream heterosexual pornography. In addition, cybersex from the Walford corpus illustrates that by reducing expressions of female sexual expression to representations found in discourses of heteronormativity and to sexual narratives constructed by male personas primarily, heterosexual masculine sexuality is constrained and limited as well. Although cybersex in Walford reinforces and recreates hegemonic heterosexuality and patriarchal discourses, cybersex may also be understood as a relatively new linguistic practice that offers participants the opportunity to use language in innovative genre-specific ways, especially in terms of narrative co-construction and person referencing.

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council [Grant EP/G059063/1]. The author also wishes to acknowledge Graham White, Colleen Cotter, Paul Curzon, Jonathan Black, Jo Brodie, the Walford community, and suggestions from an anonymous reviewer.

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